

This issue contains the results of a complex exercise by the editor of *ART and Australia*. It singles out domestic architecture (which, as several of the architects say, is Australia's best kind of architecture), it provides a comparison of the various Australian States, attempts a selection of good architects and then provides not only the illustrations but also comments from the architects in response to questions sent to them all.

Bringing such a selection together in this way has yielded a richness quite remote from the usual experience. Nevertheless, it is true to say that very few countries have such numerous examples (in proportion to their population) of outstanding works in this particular kind of building—the one-family house on a generous plot of land.

What an astonishingly silvan character Australia displays in these illustrations. How clearly the patronage for outstanding houses is an activity of those who seek out wooded, romantic sites on which to build. How responsive the architects are to those sites.

Plainly, no single vein of expression runs through these designs. There is no master or master group. Some family likenesses emerge from the widely held preference for brick, wood and tile, and some grouping could be done in terms of roof forms—the long horizontal eaves of Charlton or of Bell contrasting with the livelier shapes of Woolley or Madigan, for example. By those and other means it might be possible to tease out statements about regional characteristics, or about influences.

What can more confidently be said, though more difficult to describe, is that almost all of these houses share a striking degree of ingenuity—ingenuity which is serving life styles, rather than formalistic predilections. Almost without exception, each house holds surprises, manages uniqueness: the mysterious turning and angling which some plans of Col Madigan use; the gallery-like lighting of a Philip Cox room; the tree-trunk supported pyramid space within John Reid's house; the complex multi-level interior of Ken Woolley's. The most extreme among the ingenious expressions of life-style ideas are those in Robin Boyd's Featherston house—living platforms hanging free within a greenhouse—and in his Lyons house—rooms literally hung around the lip of a central swimming pool.

The sculptural confidence with wood plane and brick pier which shows in Charles Duncan's work, and the painterly skill with

concrete and stone bands in the house of Harry and Penelope Seidler (a house which is also a brilliant essay with interrelated levels) represent contributions of a different kind. They are closer to *styles*, in the sense used in the other visual arts (visually recognizable idiosyncrasies).

As for the words provided for this issue by the architects, the situation is the usual one which prevails among artists and architects; some confirm their work, others complement it because they have additional talents with language, and there are cases of surprise, too. The questions submitted to them by the editor were these:

1. What do you think of Australian domestic architecture?
2. Do you think it is appropriate to the country, climate and times?
3. What are your preferences for materials, and why?
4. Do you think it is possible for any control of aesthetics to be practicably introduced by authorities and, if so, how?
5. What architects in this country, if any, have influenced you for good?
6. Do you look upon architecture as an art form?

Most, as you will see, were quick to question what was meant by 'domestic architecture'. They insist that the suburban environment is mainly poor, and that the houses endured by most people cannot be praised. The kind which are displayed here, the very works of which these men are most proud, are also a source of some guilt for their designers. They are the 'one-off'—the tailor-made—which contribute so little to the total urban environment, and which are usually located in places of refuge from that environment.

Of course it can be said that the rarity of the gem is not surprising, and not specially Australian. Excellence in architecture seldom clusters conveniently, and can never afterwards be gathered in one place as can mobile works of art. The experience of searching out the best in any city of the world is a disheartening experience because of all that occurs between. For all that, these men are pointing to the fact that whole districts filled with good design, as has been managed in such places as Scandinavia, are just not to be found anywhere at all in this country. Aesthetic control appeals to a few of them as a contribution to a better urban scene, but most reject it vehemently: 'No, no', 'God forbid', 'Futile', 'Horrible', 'Advice maybe, but controls no', 'In theory it should help, in practice it does not'. Almost alone in

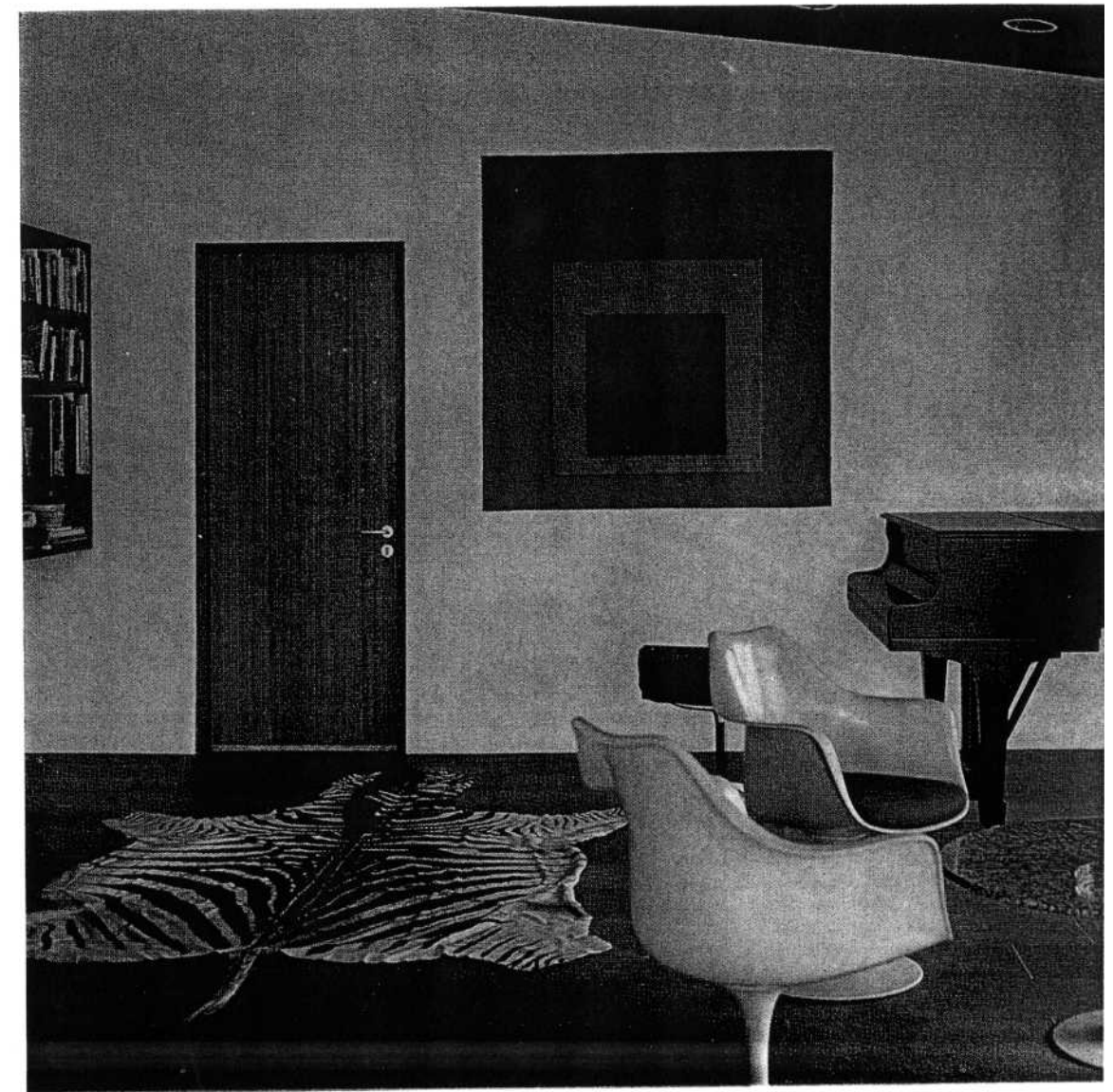
allowing generosity toward controls, Robin Boyd argues that in Canberra (residential areas, presumably) a measure of success has been demonstrated. His willingness to accept some controls is shared by Peter Overman, who suggests architect advisers to municipal councils.

The other overwhelming agreement across the continent is the preference in materials, the preference for what are called here 'natural', 'organic', 'craft' and 'traditional'. For most, this is the brick, timber and tile group. There are references to iron roofing, to asbestos cement and to concrete. Steel is mentioned once. If the choice is concerted, the reasons are various. Several are apologetic, conscious of 'this technological age'. A plea of cheapness is regularly entered on behalf of these materials. Some say they are open-minded about materials, but usually finish up with these. Others say it is a permanent love affair. Unusual comments are those of Harry Seidler, who prefers concrete and stone on grounds of permanence and heat capacity. Peter Muller mentions patina, which could well have been added to the statements of others whose statements are the more practical ones about materials which wear well.

This aspect, of the preference in materials, will very likely be the most striking one when this period is viewed in retrospect. Cost, personal inclinations, romantic leaning, or whatever, the fact is that the metals and plastics which in 1971 fill large chunks of the inhabited environment with such objects as planes, boats, computers, food packages, toys and sculptures—all of them with leading examples which are excellent and pleasing—hardly enter the construction of houses except by way of refrigerators and bench-tops. This situation is bound to change, and people have been saying for a long time that it will change, yet prophets of the subject are more timid now than they were in 1951.

The question 'Do you regard architecture as an art form?' raised—predictably—cautious responses. Note Boyd's, for example. In most replies it is made clear that architecture is more than art, perhaps therefore not art. It is more a technical service, it can be called a craft, it may also be a science. Several answers offer views of art, views which tend to dissolve the problem. The one which represents them all is Bill Lucas's, when he quotes a Balinese saying: 'We have no art, we just do everything as well as we can'.

In so far as 'art form' usually suggests *objects* of the visual arts, I think architects are clearly right to stick to the point that architecture is architecture. The strongest point in favour of its uniqueness is that, although its visual aspects are easily appreciated and often discussed separately, architecture's art is to be concerned with the aesthetic potential in all the experiences which buildings accommodate or offer, including moving, touching, and appreciation of remembered relationships.



JOSEF ALBERS FULL (1967) (on wall)  
Tapestry 60in x 60in

JESU-RAPHAEL SOTO KINETIC SCULPTURE (1968) (on piano)  
Stainless steel and plastic  
Living-room of architects' own house at Killara, New South Wales  
designed by Harry and Penelope Seidler  
Photograph by Max Dupain

